

Review: Daniel Hope electrifies Brahms and the Romantics

by Richard Scheinin

Daniel Hope is one of those infallible violinists. Every note is speared through the heart, purified. But somehow, along with the perfection, comes rich expression. His Sunday recital in Palo Alto -- part of the Music@Menlo chamber music festival -- raised certain Romantic works to a 103 degree fever-pitch, then turned cozy and meditative, drifting through delicate reveries toward a state of wonder. Everyone was content, even the birds outside; their songs grew perkier during the recital, which happened at twilight.

Performing at St. Mark's Episcopal Church with the pianist Wu Han, Hope curated his own "Carte Blanche" concert for the festival, cherry-picking favorites. And as this year's festival centers around Brahms, Hope built his recital around a figure central to the life of Brahms: the Hungarian violinist Joseph Joachim. A towering player of the 19th century, he was a sort of Zelig figure in musical culture -- a friend and musical counselor to Brahms, Dvorak, Schumann, Bruch and other composers, connecting and inspiring them to create a slew of the Romantic era's landmark works.

Fearing that Joachim's legacy is being forgotten, Hope earlier this year issued a CD on the Deutsche Grammophon label titled "The Romantic Violinist: A Celebration of Joseph Joachim." Picking up this thread Sunday, he opened with Dvorak's Four Romantic Pieces for Violin and Piano, Op. 75, setting parameters: the stomping Bohemian folk theme of the second movement, the gorgeous double-stopped melodic fragments of the fourth, gently nuzzled and grazed.

Hope explained to the audience that it was Joachim who introduced young Brahms to Robert and Clara Schumann, setting in motion one of the 19th century's most complicated (and creatively fertile) triangular relationships. Extending his thread, Hope played Clara Schumann's Romance, Op. 22, No.1, a work that she (a legendary pianist) and Joachim performed on tour. Their fans included King George V, who "went into ecstasy" over the Romance, Hope explained. "So I thought I'd just warn you."

Sunday's performance was sturdy and sweet, but the ecstasy began with Brahms' Violin Sonata No. 1 in G Major, Op. 78, a work dedicated to Joachim. You can hear this piece countless times and still be stunned by its depths -- and its accessibility, like some amazing pop ballad. That opening melody, those startling chords! Where in the depths of imagination does a composer even conceive of such things?

Hope grew up in England and lives in Hamburg, Germany -- Brahms' hometown. And he has access to a certain brand of Romantic feeling; there's unbridled passion in his playing, balanced by old-fashioned dignity and even reserve. In the final movement, he and Wu Han played with an airy, rippling delicacy -- a fragility, even. One could imagine Debussy hearing this music and finding inspiration in it.

The concert's second half was more consistently extroverted. It included the controlled fever of "Hexenlied" ("Witches Song"), Op. 8, by Felix Mendelssohn, an important mentor to Joachim. (Mendelssohn composed the piece for voice and piano; Hope arranged



it for violin and piano.) It also included a work composed by Joachim, his Romance, Op. 2, No. 1, heavy with nostalgia, here given a swaying and aching performance by Hope and his accompanist.

Then something unusual happened as Hope's recital approached its end: The violinist stepped back into the ranks of a festival all-star quartet.

Out came violist Paul Neubauer and cellist David Finckel, who founded the festival in 2003 with Wu Han, his wife. (She and Finckel are Menlo's artistic directors.) With Wu Han still at the piano, and the audience cheering, the group settled in for Brahms' Piano Quartet in G minor, Op. 25.

Finckel has a way of galvanizing performances, and this one was electric.

The members of the group played like old friends, bending with one another, growing ferocious or seeming to ask some big metaphysical question with each repetition of the four-note theme that sighs through much of the opening Allegro. Each movement of this vast piece is a latticework; there's always something new to take in.

This time, the otherworldly textures at the close of the Intermezzo were especially precise and eerie. While the closing Rondo alla zingarese (Rondo in the Gypsy Style) took off like a Lamborghini on a mountain pass: accelerations and decelerations, stops and starts and whiplash turns -- a wild ride, brilliantly executed. When it was over, some teenagers at the back of the hall -- young musicians from the festival's summer institute -- broke into laughter and sang another chorus of Brahms' Gypsy song.